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Female Arab International Students Negotiate Their Identities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the identity negotiation of Muslim female international students in ESL classrooms in the mid-southern United States, where linguistic adaptation and cultural integration pressures intersect. Drawing on intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and Kim's International Student Identity Model, this research highlights how these students navigate religious, gendered, and cultural expectations within Western academic settings. A qualitative methodology utilizing semi-structured interviews with six participants revealed key themes: cultural and religious identity adaptation, experiences of discrimination, and resilience strategies. Participants described the dual pressure of conforming to Western norms while upholding Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab and adhering to halal dietary restrictions. Findings underscore the need for inclusive ESL pedagogies that integrate cultural competency training, peer mentorship programs, and institutional policy reforms. By fostering an equitable learning environment, institutions can enhance cross-cultural understanding and student well-being. This research contributes to scholarship on international student adaptation and identity-affirming educational spaces.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, discrimination, ESL education, identity negotiation, intersectionality, Muslim international students, resilience, student integration

Within the context of increasing enrollment of Muslim international students in U.S. higher education, a trend with significant implications for both the Arab world and Western cultural dynamics, recent data highlight this continued growth. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2024), more than 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions during the 2023–2024 academic year, reflecting a 7% increase from the previous year. The expansion of this student population is further demonstrated by visa

issuance statistics. For instance, 240,826 student visas were granted in the 2013–2014 academic year, rising to 284,420 in 2014–2015, an 18% increase in just one year (Anderson, 2020). This growth aligns with broader global trends in academic mobility, as students increasingly seek educational opportunities beyond their home countries. However, despite the benefits of international education, students—particularly those who are English language learners—often face challenges such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, and adapting to unfamiliar academic expectations (Curaj & Future of Higher Education Bologna Process Researchers' Conference, 2020).

A notable focus of the study is the emergence of Islamic feminism as more women from predominantly Muslim nations migrate to the northern hemisphere for education. Rooted in the teachings of Islam and the Qur'an, Islamic feminism advocates for equality across genders in both public and private spheres (Moghissi, 2019). This movement, primarily driven by youth, challenges traditional norms and has begun to reshape public discourse regarding gender roles, particularly by empowering Arab women historically marginalized in political and academic narratives—to voice their perspectives and engage as public intellectuals (Bayat & Herrera, 2010; Jad, 2013). The article highlights that such cultural shifts, enabled by digital technologies and international education networks, provide platforms for these women to overcome longstanding barriers to self-expression and influence public discourse on gender equality.

The text then contextualizes the significance of cultural, religious, and societal diversity. It stresses that human identity is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, religious beliefs, historical contexts, and geographical influences. Islamic teachings emphasize the inherently social nature of humans (Esposito, 2011), and this perspective is used to argue that societies are dynamic entities whose norms evolve over time. As over 50 Muslim nations become increasingly influential on the global stage, their citizens' experiences—particularly regarding the intersection of language, culture, and rights (*haq ul-nas*, as referenced in Islamic tradition) become essential to understanding broader social transformations.

In addressing the challenges faced by Muslim international students, the article notes that despite their growing numbers, these students still confront significant obstacles as a minority group within U.S. educational institutions. For example, during the 2018–2019 academic year, international students constituted 5.5% of the U.S. student body (OECD, 2019), and political measures such as travel bans on citizens from predominantly Islamic countries have deepened mistrust and exacerbated feelings of marginalization. These policies have not only influenced perceptions among the American public but have also complicated the experiences of Muslim students, who must negotiate their identities amidst stereotypes and geopolitical tensions. Prior research, including studies on post-9/11 Muslim American youth, has tended to overgeneralize the experiences of international students without sufficiently addressing the within-group differences (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

Central to the study is the role of English language proficiency, especially for Arab female Muslim international students studying in a city referred to as

Nexus City—a pseudonym for a Mid-Southern U.S. locale characterized by its predominantly English-speaking environment and modest population. English is portrayed not simply as an academic requirement but as a vital tool for accessing social, cultural, and professional opportunities. The transformative power of learning English is emphasized, as it can propel students out of their comfort zones, catalyze personal growth, and facilitate deeper self-understanding (Hinkel, 2005; Mackey & Gass, 2011, 2015). Nonetheless, the study also acknowledges that an exclusive focus on English may inadvertently marginalize other linguistic and cultural perspectives that are equally significant in identity formation (Canagarajah, 2012).

The theoretical underpinning of the research draws on the frameworks of intersectionality and postmodern identity theory. Intersectionality, a concept originally formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is employed to illustrate how multiple social categories including gender, race, class, and religion interact to shape the unique experiences of these students (Aljumah, 2020; McCall, 2005). Postmodern identity theory further contributes by emphasizing that identity is fluid, continually evolving, and constructed through ongoing social interactions (Duff, 2007). Additionally, postcolonial feminist theory is integrated to critique the homogenizing tendencies of Western feminist discourses, which have historically oversimplified the lived experiences of women in the Global South. This triadic theoretical approach melding intersectionality, postcolonial feminist theory, and postmodern identity perspectives provides a robust analytical lens for understanding how Arab female Muslim international students navigate their multifaceted identities within the ESL classroom.

The article then details the study's conceptual framework, often referred to as the International Student Identity (ISI) model. This six-phase model outlines the trajectory of identity formation among international students. The phases begin with pre-exposure, in which students plan their educational journey and confront initial challenges such as cultural shock and language barriers. The subsequent phase's exposure, enclosure, emergence, consolidation, and finally transitions and departures describe a dynamic process in which students gradually adjust to their new environment, integrate diverse cultural influences, develop supportive networks, and ultimately prepare for future reintegration or further cultural transitions. Each phase is associated with specific strategies such as orientation, mentorship, community engagement, and reflective practices that are vital for successful adaptation.

This qualitative study focuses on capturing the lived experiences of Arab female Muslim international students through methods like the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and semi-structured interviews. The CIT is utilized to document pivotal moments both positive and negative in the students' language learning journeys, while semi-structured interviews provide a platform for in-depth, reflective narratives. These approaches allow for a nuanced exploration of how these students negotiate their identities in relation to the intersecting demands of language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and social integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The experiences of international students have been the subject of increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding the challenges faced by Muslim international students as they navigate diverse educational and cultural landscapes. Recent scholarship has explored various dimensions of these experiences, including identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, institutional support, and socio-political influences, offering critical insights into the barriers and opportunities these students encounter.

Chen, Tabassum, and Saeed (2019) examined the challenges faced by Muslim international students in China, highlighting cultural adaptation difficulties, inadequate institutional support for religious practices, and social isolation. Their findings underscore the importance of universities implementing measures to accommodate the religious and cultural needs of Muslim students, thereby fostering a more inclusive academic environment. Similarly, Anderson (2020) conducted a phenomenological study in the United States, emphasizing the interplay between religious, cultural, and academic identities. His research illustrates the complexities of identity formation and the necessity for institutions to create environments that support the holistic well-being of international students.

Further, the socio-political dimensions of Muslim international students' experiences have also been explored. Allen and Bista (2021) discussed the heightened surveillance and scrutiny faced by students from Muslim-majority countries in the United States. Their study highlights the broader geopolitical influences on academic experiences and the need for protective institutional policies. Additionally, Karaman (2022) investigated the racialization and insider-outsider dynamics that shape international students' academic and social lives, providing a nuanced perspective on racial identity construction in higher education. In a personal narrative, Pazil (2022) reflected on her experience as a Muslim Asian woman in the United Kingdom, shedding light on the complexities of identity negotiation and the significance of fostering supportive environments for international students.

Collectively, these studies contribute to a growing body of literature that underscores the critical need for higher education institutions to implement culturally responsive policies and practices. By acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by Muslim international students, institutions can foster more inclusive, equitable, and supportive learning environments. This review situates these discussions within broader theoretical and empirical frameworks, offering insights into how universities can better serve diverse student populations.

Arab female international students from predominantly Muslim nations leave their homes to pursue higher education in the United States, seeking both academic excellence and opportunities for personal growth. Their journeys, however, are characterized by complex negotiations of socio-cultural identities that are shaped by intersecting dimensions of gender, race, religion, language, and

national background. While a growing body of research has examined international student adaptation and identity formation in Western academic settings, relatively few studies have specifically addressed the experiences of Arab female Muslim students within English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. This literature review critically examines existing research on international student identity formation, emphasizing four key themes: (1) Intersectionality and Postcolonial Feminism; (2) Muslim Student Experiences in Western Contexts; (3) Language Acquisition and Identity; and (4) Cultural Adaptation Strategies. A discussion of Kim's International Student Identity (ISI) Model is also included as a conceptual framework for understanding these complex identity negotiations.

Intersectionality and Postcolonial Feminism

Central to understanding the identity formation of Arab female Muslim international students is the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) introduced this idea to explain how overlapping social identities, such as race, gender, and class, create distinct modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality reveals that identity is not monolithic but consists of multiple, interrelated facets that shape an individual's lived experience. Scholars argue that these intersections require analysis of structural inequalities and individual agency.

Complementing intersectionality is postcolonial feminism. Mohanty (2003) critiques Western feminist narratives for homogenizing the experiences of non-Western women, overlooking the importance of historical and cultural contexts. Postcolonial feminist theory posits that women's identities from the Global South are dynamic and context-specific, resisting simplistic categorizations imposed by dominant Western discourses. Thus, the experiences of Arab female Muslim students cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the legacy of colonialism and ongoing tensions between Western representations of Islam and the self-constructed identities of Muslim women. Researchers like Golnaraghi and Dye (2016) have used symbols like the headscarf as sites of contestation, where identity negotiation becomes an act of agency. This lens highlights the need to view identity formation as a fluid, contested process that reflects both resistance to external stereotypes and the affirmation of self-defined cultural values.

Muslim Student Experiences in Western Contexts

Studies exploring the experiences of Muslim international students in Western academic institutions have consistently highlighted challenges related to Islamophobia, cultural isolation, and insufficient institutional support. Research by Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) indicates that many Muslim students struggle to balance their religious obligations with Western universities' academic and social demands. For instance, the requirement to pray five times a day, which is integral to Islamic practice, often conflicts with rigid class schedules and academic calendars that do not accommodate such religious needs. Consequently, many Muslim students find themselves in a dual role as both learners and ambassadors,

having to explain and defend their cultural and religious practices in predominantly non-Muslim environments.

Furthermore, the heightened atmosphere of suspicion following events such as 9/11 and more recent political developments has exacerbated feelings of marginalization among Muslim students. Research has documented how policies and campus climates sometimes foster “Othering” – a process by which Muslim students are perceived as inherently different and are subjected to discriminatory practices. Studies by Gregory (2014) and Mir (2011) reveal recurring themes of discrimination, isolation, and the stress of being continuously required to negotiate their public identities in ways that counter prevailing stereotypes. Such experiences are not merely episodic; they influence these students' long-term academic, social, and psychological well-being. The literature thus underscores that while Muslim students may be highly capable academically, their integration into Western institutions is often hampered by systemic biases and a lack of culturally responsive support systems.

Language Acquisition and Identity

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping identity, particularly for international students in ESL settings. Kim (2001) conceptualizes the process of identity negotiation in language acquisition as a multi-phase process—typically encompassing pre-exposure, exposure, enclosure, and emergence. For Arab female Muslim students, proficiency in English is not simply an academic necessity; it is also a critical tool for social integration and self-expression. Mastery of the English language can bolster students' confidence, enhance their participation in classroom discourse, and facilitate more meaningful interactions with peers and faculty. Research by Hinkel (2005) and Mackey and Gass (2011, 2015) demonstrates that language acquisition has transformative effects on learners, enabling them to step outside their comfort zones and engage more fully with their host cultures.

However, the process of acquiring a new language is also imbued with challenges. The act of learning English often requires students to confront and reconcile their native cultural and linguistic identities with those of the dominant culture. This negotiation is not merely about language mechanics; it involves a profound re-articulation of self. Canagarajah (2012) cautions that an exclusive focus on English might inadvertently marginalize other languages and cultural expressions that are integral to the students' identities. Thus, the identity formation of Arab female Muslim students is closely tied to their linguistic journeys, wherein language proficiency becomes a means of asserting agency, negotiating social boundaries, and crafting a hybrid identity that encompasses both heritage and newfound cultural influences.

Cultural Adaptation Strategies

The literature also highlights a range of cultural adaptation strategies that international students employ to navigate the complexities of life in a new cultural environment. Research by Alharbi (2020) and Smith and Khawaja (2011) indicate that many students create cultural enclaves and seek mentorship as a coping

mechanism. These strategies enable students to manage the cultural shock associated with transitioning from a predominantly Muslim society to a Western academic setting. For instance, Arab female Muslim students often form support networks with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds, thereby creating a sense of community and belonging amidst the broader campus environment.

Mentorship emerges as a critical factor in facilitating cultural adaptation. Through mentorship, students receive guidance on navigating institutional structures and bridging cultural differences. This support not only aids in academic success but also contributes to the development of a cohesive personal identity. Such cultural adaptation strategies are indicative of a broader pattern wherein international students actively engage in processes of self-preservation and identity reinforcement. They do so by constructing social spaces that reflect their values and by leveraging interpersonal relationships to buffer against experiences of isolation and marginalization.

Despite the effectiveness of these strategies, the literature reveals a significant gap: few studies have examined the specific experiences of Arab female Muslim students within ESL settings. While general studies on international student adaptation provide valuable insights into issues such as homesickness, culture shock, and language barriers, they often fail to account for the unique intersection of gender, religion, and cultural expectations that shape the experiences of Arab female Muslim students. This gap underscores the need for focused research addressing the nuanced challenges these students face, particularly as they negotiate multiple, often conflicting, demands from their native cultures and the host society.

Kim's International Student Identity (ISI) Model

The literature often references Kim's International Student Identity (ISI) Model to further illuminate the identity formation process. Originally conceptualized as a six-phase process, the model has been adapted and simplified to capture the unique experiences of Arab female Muslim international students in ESL contexts. In its simplified form, the model consists of four phases: pre-exposure, exposure, enclosure, and emergence.

Table 1: International Student Identity Model (Kim, 2012)

Phase	Description
Pre-exposure	Students plan to study in the U.S. for its education system.
Exposure	Students arrive, facing cultural and educational differences while gaining independence.
Enclosure	Students withdraw to focus on academic adjustment.
Emergence	Students build social networks and engage in activities.

Note. This table summarizes the phases of international student development. Anderson, D. L. (2020). Muslim international students in the United States: A phenomenological inquiry into the experience of identities. *Journal of International Students*, 10(2), 320-338.

This model provides a valuable framework for understanding the fluid and dynamic nature of identity among international students. It emphasizes that identity is not a fixed construct but is continually reshaped by ongoing interactions with both local and global cultural influences. Anderson (2020) and others have highlighted the utility of the ISI Model in capturing the evolving identity projects of Arab female Muslim students, who must constantly reconcile conflicting cultural expectations while asserting their individual agency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interrelated theories—Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism, and Kim's International Student Identity Model—to examine the identity negotiation of Arab female Muslim students in ESL classrooms. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) explores how intersecting identities (gender, race, religion, and class) shape experiences of marginalization and privilege. Research (Wang et al., 2020; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023) highlights how these students face exclusion while also demonstrating resilience.

Postcolonial Feminism (Mohanty, 2003) critiques Western feminist narratives that overlook cultural specificities, emphasizing how educational institutional biases marginalize non-Western epistemologies (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2016). This lens helps analyze how Western ideals influence Arab female Muslim students' self-perception and academic experiences.

Kim's Model of Cultural Adjustment

Kim's model views acculturation as a dynamic process where individuals balance maintaining their cultural heritage with adapting to a new environment. In this study, it helps explain how Arab female Muslim students navigate the tension between Western academic norms and their own cultural identities. Aysha, a Saudi student, illustrates this by actively engaging in class while maintaining cultural practices like wearing the hijab and participating in gender-segregated interactions. Her experience reflects Kim's concept of acculturation as an ongoing negotiation between the familiar and the foreign, shaped by both cultural heritage and academic expectations.

Postcolonial Feminism: Resistance and Hybrid Identity Formation

Postcolonial feminist theory provides a framework for understanding how Arab female Muslim international students resist marginalization and form hybrid identities. This theory challenges fixed notions of identity, viewing it as fluid and shaped by political, social, and cultural forces (Mohanty, 2003). The study highlights how students resist Western stereotypes and traditional gender expectations. For example, Suad, a Syrian refugee, navigates a secular academic environment by blending Western feminism with her Islamic values. Her experience reflects postmodern views of identity as constantly evolving, shaped by lived experiences and resistance to dominant structures.

Intersectionality Theory: Understanding the Complexity of Identity

Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is essential for analyzing the experiences of Arab female Muslim international students. It posits that individuals experience discrimination through overlapping identities, such as race, gender, religion, and immigrant status, rather than isolated factors. This framework reveals how multiple social categories intersect to shape experiences, especially in contexts of power and oppression. For instance, Maryam's hijab is scrutinized not only due to her religious beliefs but also through the racialized and gendered lens of her peers. Maryam's experiences with external pressures due to her attire highlight the complexities of cultural adaptation. She shared, "Why are you wearing a hijab?" or "Why are you not wearing anything else?" Intersectionality highlights the compounded challenges these students face, emphasizing how they navigate and resist intersecting systems of marginalization.

METHOD

A qualitative, constructivist approach was chosen to explore how these students navigate identity, culture, and educational challenges in ESL programs. The study recruited six Arab female Muslim students (18+ years) via purposive sampling from mosques, community centers, and ESL programs. Participants represented diverse migration experiences, from recent arrivals to long-term residents.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The study included six Arab female Muslim international students (18+ years) enrolled in adult ESL programs. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring diverse perspectives from recent immigrants to long-term U.S. residents. Recruitment involved posting flyers at mosques, community centers, and ESL venues, along with leveraging professional networks. While the small sample size limits generalizability, it was suitable for a phenomenological inquiry focused on thematic saturation.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in capturing identity formation and cultural adaptation. Before interviews, participants completed a Critical Incident Report (CIR) to document key experiences shaping their ESL journey. The CIR, based on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique, highlighted both challenges and successes in adapting to a new cultural and educational environment.

Interviews followed a structured yet flexible guide, ensuring consistent exploration of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and language challenges while allowing deeper inquiry into emerging themes.

Data Analysis and Coding Process

Data from interviews and CIRs underwent thematic analysis using QDA Miner Lite. The coding process included initial broad coding (academic challenges, cultural adaptation), refinement via in vivo coding, and structural coding aligned with research questions. This systematic approach captured how intersecting identities shape students' ESL experiences and adaptation strategies.

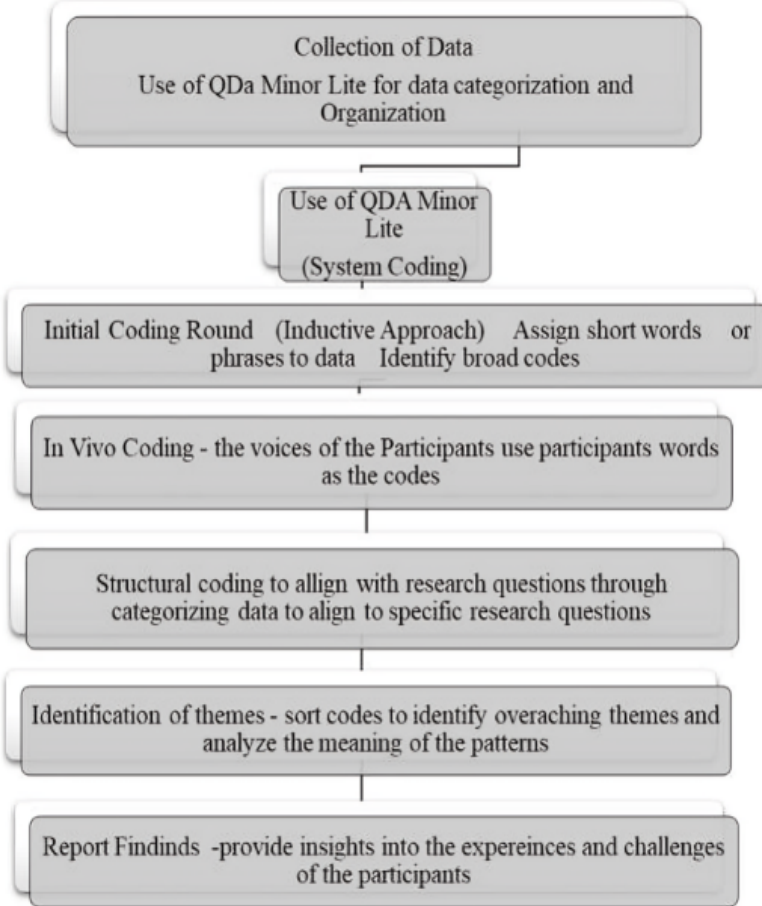


Figure 1: The Data Collection Process to the Development of the Codes

The data analysis employed thematic analysis via QDA Miner Lite, beginning with broad coding (academic challenges, cultural adaptation) and refined through in vivo and structural coding linked to research questions. This method illuminated the intersecting identities that shape ESL students' experiences. The coding process revealed core themes such as academic struggles, language barriers, cultural adaptation, racial dynamics, and gender-related issues. These themes reveal how broader sociocultural forces, including race, gender, and cultural norms, influence students' integration into the ESL context.

Understanding these intersections challenges traditional pedagogical models and calls for more inclusive, identity-conscious educational frameworks (Kubota, 2014; Berry, 1997).

Table 2. Participants Vignettes

Summary of the Participants

Participant	Motivation	Challenges	Identity Formation	Framework	Outcome
Fatima (Yemen)	Cultural norms, agency, empowerment	Cultural differences, language acquisition	Adaptive identity, embracing diversity	Post-Colonial Feminism	Educational empowerment, cultural understanding
Aysha (Palestine)	Social integration, public services, family support	Language barriers, cultural adaptation	Desire to integrate, social recognition	Intersectionality	Access to services, global participation
Suad (Palestine)	Cultural norms, communication skills	Cross-cultural conflicts, identity challenges	Hybrid identity, expanded vocabulary	Postmodern Identity Formation	Fluent communication, professional growth
Maryam (Syria)	Social integration, job security, family support	Language barrier, sociocultural identity	Blending tradition with modern values	Globalization	Career advancement, social integration, access to services
Ahlam (Iraq)	U.S. integration, navigating religion	Cultural adaptation, language barriers	Identity negotiation, multilingualism	Postmodern Identity Formation	Increased confidence, safety, adaptability
Mona (Iraq)	U.S. integration, employment	Academic and language challenges	Intersectional identity, cultural adaptation	Intersectionality	ESL proficiency, professional growth, cultural sensitivity

Note. This table summarizes participants' motivations, challenges, identity formation, theoretical frameworks, and outcomes in learning English.

Positionality and Limitations

The researcher’s transparency about her positionality strengthened the study by shaping data interpretation. As a former ESL instructor and current ESL program director with Middle Eastern heritage, she brought both professional expertise and personal experience, fostering trust with participants. Her cultural background allowed her to ask nuanced questions, enhancing data authenticity.

Reflexivity was maintained through self-reflection, research memos, and a journal, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than researcher bias.

The study's small sample size limits generalizability, and participant response depth varied. Virtual interviews posed technical and privacy concerns, while qualitative coding software risked oversimplification. These challenges were mitigated through triangulation, alternative communication methods, and a mixed coding approach.

RESULTS

This study examines how six Arab female Muslim international students in Southern U.S. ESL programs navigate gender, race, culture, and language. Using thematic analysis grounded in cultural adjustment, postcolonial feminism, and intersectionality, it explores their experiences with identity, religious expression, discrimination, and academic life. The findings reveal complex intersections of identity, with participants facing challenges related to gender, race, and cultural expectations. Many described a duality in balancing traditional religious values with the demands of an American academic environment. Experiences of discrimination, both subtle and overt, shaped their interactions and sense of belonging. However, participants also highlighted their resilience, with some using their identities as a source of empowerment. The results underscore the importance of understanding how cultural and religious backgrounds influence academic experiences and suggest that greater institutional support is needed to foster inclusive environments for international students from marginalized groups.

FINDINGS: MAJOR THEMES AND EVIDENCE-BASED ANALYSIS

Theme 1: Coping Strategies

A central theme of this study is the dynamic negotiation of cultural identity by Arab female Muslim international students, who navigate the tension between assimilating into Western educational norms and preserving their religious and cultural practices. Participants' experiences illustrate the complex interplay of dual identities—one rooted in their heritage and the other shaped by academic and societal expectations (Kim, 2001). Their narratives highlight how these students employ diverse strategies to maintain their cultural integrity while adapting to new environments. This ongoing negotiation underscores the challenges and resilience involved in balancing multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural identities in an ESL context.

Aysha, for instance, reflects on her adaptation process: "My friends' bilingualism allows for a deeper level of understanding and respect between

different cultures and languages” (personal communication, 2024). She adapts to American educational practices, such as engaging in classroom discussions, while maintaining cultural practices outside the classroom, such as gender segregation and wearing traditional dress (Norton, 2000). Aysha further explains, “I wear dresses like kaftans when I'm out and about or attending a casual gathering. Overall, my attire and actions reflect my commitment to my faith and desire to live a simple and humble life” (personal communication, 2024). This dynamic process highlights the challenge of preserving an authentic cultural identity amidst pressure to conform to dominant academic norms. The study reveals how international students reconcile expectations from both their cultural heritage and the Western educational environment (Zhou & Lee, 2017).

Theme 2 Cross-Cultural Conflict and Socio-Cultural Identity

Participants like Fatima and Suad exemplify hybrid identity formation, integrating diverse cultural elements into a cohesive self-concept. Suad notes, “Despite facing numerous obstacles, I am still able to interact with people. I believe my situation is unique because Muslims are becoming more visible in America, which makes me feel less different. The hijab I wear is an outward symbol of my faith and identity, and it is recognized by many people around the world. Wearing a hijab that understands the struggles of Muslims” (personal communication, 2024); Bhabha, 1994).

Suad, a refugee, navigates her identity by reconciling her Islamic values with Western feminist ideals. She states, “It is possible to learn from different cultures and adopt their practices, but one should not lose sight of one's own identity” (personal communication, 2024). Her selective integration of these perspectives illustrates the dynamic nature of identity construction among international students as they balance multiple cultural influences while resisting full assimilation (Morrell, 2001).

Theme 3: Cross-Cultural Conflict and Its Impact on Academic Experiences

Muslim female international students, particularly in reconciling their religious practices with the secular demands of academic life. Aysha and Maryam's experiences illustrate the difficulties in navigating religious observances within an educational system that is often unaccommodating to minority religious practices.

Aysha's struggles in finding suitable language classes on campus amidst her demanding schedule highlight a systemic gap: the failure of educational institutions to accommodate minority cultures. She explains, “I took courses to improve my English and learn more about American culture” (personal communication, 2024), reflecting her attempt to balance academic growth with cultural integration. Similarly, Maryam's experience of being unable to find halal food on campus exposes how university dining services frequently overlook the dietary needs of Muslim students. This cross-cultural conflict underscores the broader challenges students face when their religious and cultural needs are sidelined in secular educational environments, impacting their academic experiences and sense of belonging (Abdel-Fattah, 2015; Ahmed, 2011).

Aysha further notes, “Finding a balance between my faith and academic obligations is something I’m still learning to navigate” (personal communication, 2024). This statement reveals the broader challenges students face when their religious and cultural needs are marginalized in secular academic environments, impacting their academic experiences and sense of belonging.

Theme 4: Identity and Perception of Experience

This theme explores how participants' socio-cultural identities shape their perceptions and experiences as ESL learners. The intersection of cultural identity and academic resilience reveals the complex ways participants navigate cross-cultural educational settings (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Cultural, religious, and linguistic factors influence not only how students approach language learning but also how they engage in broader social environments. These identities serve as both sources of resilience and challenges, as they contend with the pressures of assimilation while striving to preserve cultural and religious values.

Framed through postcolonial feminist theory, resistance emerges as a strategy to reclaim agency in spaces that marginalize religious identities (hooks, 1984). Aysha’s advocacy for a prayer space on campus and Maryam’s push for halal food accommodations illustrate how personal acts of resistance can drive institutional change (Ferguson, 2018). Aysha explains, “I read the Quran during my prayers. I almost always wear modest clothing. I try my best to avoid anything that draws too much attention... I wear dresses like kaftans when I’m out and about or attending a casual gathering. Overall, my attire and actions reflect my commitment to my faith and desire to live a simple and humble life” (personal communication, 2024).

Fatima similarly asserts, “Seeing me wearing a hijab does not bother me at all. It helps me feel more connected to my beliefs and personal identity” (personal communication, 2024). These narratives underscore the role of religious identity as a defining feature in their academic and social interactions, highlighting their broader resistance against secular pressures in their environment.

Theme 5: Cross-Cultural Adaptation Strategies

This theme critically examines the diverse strategies that international female students use to negotiate their identities while adapting to new cultural environments in ESL settings. The participants' experiences underscore the complex balance between preserving cultural integrity and adapting to the host culture.

Fatima’s statement, “Seeing me wearing a hijab does not bother me. It brings me a sense of tranquility and connection to my faith” (personal communication, 2024), reflects how cultural practices can serve as a source of strength and resilience, even in environments that may be unfamiliar or unsupportive. Similarly, Aysha’s approach, “I try to avoid wearing anything that draws too much attention as it goes against my personal values and beliefs” (personal communication, 2024), illustrates the delicate balance international students must strike between adhering to personal values and fitting into the cultural norms of their new environment.

These experiences demonstrate that cross-cultural adaptation is not a linear process but a dynamic negotiation of multiple identities. These strategies reveal the emotional labor required to balance the demands of assimilation with the preservation of cultural identity. This theme highlights the need for academic institutions to recognize and actively support this complex process by fostering inclusive environments that respect diverse cultural identities. By doing so, institutions can facilitate smoother adaptation and enhance the academic success of international students, promoting a climate of understanding and cultural sensitivity within ESL classrooms.

Theme 6: Impact on Academic Performance

The participants report encountering implicit biases from peers and faculty, reflecting broader societal stereotypes about Arab and Muslim women. The participants revealed the academic hurdles they faced, particularly language barriers, and the proactive strategies they employed to overcome them.

Fatima, for example, struggled with the extensive reading requirements due to limited vocabulary, stating, “Reading is very hard right now; I need to open the dictionary every time to understand” (personal communication, 2024). This statement highlights the ongoing difficulties of comprehending academic texts in a second language. Ahlam recalls being stereotyped as submissive and oppressed due to her Middle Eastern background. She asserts, “In the beginning, we used to feel shy and hesitant to get to know people and talk to them. Personally, I was particularly shy about speaking English as I was afraid of sounding harsh and making others feel bad” (personal communication, 2024).

Suad also shares instances where instructors showed impatience with her language barriers. These microaggressions, often subtle, accumulate and foster a hostile environment, undermining students' sense of belonging and academic success. She notes, “My children have faced discrimination in their schools. The reason behind this discrimination is that my children are immigrants, and they speak both Arabic and English” (personal communication, 2024); Sue et al., 2007). The evidence indicates that microaggressions not only harm self-esteem but also influence identity development, resulting in feelings of alienation and social marginalization.

Impact on Identity Negotiation

Intersectionality theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how discriminatory experiences are intensified by overlapping identities, such as race, religion, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Maryam's experience, where her hijab is questioned by classmates, illustrates how racial and religious biases intersect to amplify discrimination. Rather than internalizing these negative encounters, many participants actively engage in self-representation, challenging the stereotypes imposed on them. These acts of resistance exemplify how individuals can reclaim agency over their identities and assert their right to be seen and heard beyond limiting cultural narratives (Lewis, 2015).

Coping Strategies and Adaptive Mechanisms

Given the multifaceted challenges faced by the participants, the study identifies several adaptive coping strategies that enable them to navigate their academic and social environments effectively.

Peer Networks and Community Support

Social networks and peer organizations emerge as critical sources of emotional and academic support. Participants like Fatima and Maryam rely heavily on these networks to navigate their academic challenges and provide a sense of belonging in an otherwise alienating environment (Tinto, 1993). These networks offer a space for cultural exchange and mutual support, which help to mitigate feelings of isolation and foster resilience in the face of discrimination. The evidence underscores the significance of these informal support systems in promoting academic success and emotional well-being, particularly when formal institutional support is lacking.

Faculty Mentorship and Institutional Support

Faculty mentorship is a key element that positively impacts students' academic integration. Maryam's experience with an ESL instructor who took time to understand her cultural background demonstrates how individualized support can boost both academic success and cultural validation (Gay, 2010). Culturally competent faculty members not only assist in overcoming language barriers but also affirm students' cultural identities, fostering a more inclusive learning environment. This mentorship can mitigate the effects of implicit bias and ensure that international students have the resources they need to succeed academically and socially.

Self-Advocacy and Individual Agency

The study underscores the importance of self-advocacy in challenging institutional barriers. Aysha's successful lobbying for a designated prayer space on campus illustrates how individual efforts can drive institutional change. These acts of self-advocacy, viewed through a postcolonial feminist lens, emphasize that resistance, whether subtle or overt, is a vital strategy for reclaiming agency in potentially oppressive environments (Lewis, 2015). By taking control of their educational experiences, the participants show that they are not passive recipients of discrimination but active agents capable of challenging and reshaping institutional practices (Crenshaw, 1991; Norton, 2000).

Implications for ESL Education and Policy

The study's findings highlight critical implications for ESL education and institutional policies, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, enhanced faculty mentorship, religious accommodations, and support structures for students with intersectional identities. Educators must adopt inclusive teaching methods that acknowledge diverse cultural and religious identities, as

traditional Western-centric pedagogical practices can marginalize international students; thus, curricula should integrate multicultural perspectives to support students' cultural adaptation and identity negotiation. Faculty mentorship plays a crucial role in fostering student success, making it imperative for institutions to invest in professional development programs that enhance cultural competence and address implicit biases, thereby creating a more supportive learning environment. Additionally, the challenges faced by students like Aysha and Maryam regarding religious expression underscore the necessity of institutional policies that accommodate diverse religious practices, such as prayer spaces, and flexible scheduling for religious observances, all of which contribute to a more inclusive campus culture. Finally, recognizing that students' challenges stem from the intersection of multiple identities—gender, race, religion, and immigrant status—institutions should establish dedicated resource centers that provide tailored support, ensuring that international and minority students receive holistic assistance in navigating academic and social challenges.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the challenges faced by Arab female Muslim international students in ESL programs, focusing on the complex interplay of cultural adaptation, religious expression, and resilience. Grounded in intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and Kim's cultural adjustment model, it reveals how these students navigate their identities in a new academic environment. Through real-life examples like Aysha's balancing act between cultural observance and classroom engagement, and Maryam's efforts to secure dietary accommodations, the study calls for a reevaluation of ESL practices. Educators must adopt culturally responsive strategies, inclusive policies, and strong mentorship to empower students academically and personally.

The research advocates for a shift in ESL pedagogies towards inclusivity, recognizing the diverse experiences of international students. It calls for frameworks that address barriers while celebrating students' resilience and agency. Language learning and cultural negotiation become tools for empowerment, and the findings offer a hopeful vision for more equitable ESL education. By focusing on cultural identity, religious expression, and discrimination, the study calls for comprehensive, culturally sensitive responses, offering a foundation for future research and policy development.

The study also contributes to literature on international students' identity negotiation in environments where cultural and religious practices are often marginalized. The experiences of Fatima, Aysha, Suad, Maryam, Ahlam, and Mona demonstrate how self-advocacy, community support, and faculty mentorship can foster academic success. By fostering inclusive, culturally sensitive climates in ESL programs, institutions can ensure students feel supported. Ultimately, the research emphasizes that identity negotiation is a dynamic process, and by adopting inclusive pedagogies and policies, educational systems can empower students with intersecting identities to succeed.

The study's findings offer a nuanced account of how Arab female Muslim international students navigate their ESL experiences in the mid-southern United States. Interpreting these results through the lenses of Kim's cultural adjustment model, postcolonial feminism, and intersectionality theory provides a robust framework for understanding the multiple, often conflicting, dimensions of identity formation. This discussion examines the role of intersectionality in shaping identity, considers the broader institutional implications for creating inclusive ESL environments, and situates the findings within the existing literature on international student adaptation.

The Impact of Intersectionality on Identity Formation in ESL Environments: A Critical Analysis

Intersectionality, a framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights the interconnectedness of social categorizations such as gender, race, culture, and language, which together influence systems of privilege and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989). In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, this perspective is vital for understanding how international students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, navigate their identities amidst conflicting cultural expectations. The analysis of these students' lived experiences reveals that their identities are shaped not only by language proficiency but also by complex, overlapping social categories, which create multifaceted experiences of both empowerment and oppression (Brah, 1996).

The Role of Intersectionality in Identity Formation

The study's findings show that identity formation among Arab female Muslim international students in ESL classrooms is a dynamic process shaped by the intersection of race, gender, culture, and language. These students face unique challenges that can't be understood by focusing on one aspect alone. Fatima's narrative, for example, highlights her resistance to erasing cultural markers like the hijab while navigating pressures to assimilate into Western academic practices. This resistance reflects a broader phenomenon where students assert hybrid identities, continuously negotiated in academic spaces that may not fully embrace cultural, religious, and linguistic differences (Anzaldúa, 1987).

This intersectional experience highlights a "third space," where hybrid identities are forged, resonating with postcolonial feminist theory and intersectionality. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of a "third space" emphasizes spaces where students create identities that are neither fully aligned with their cultural heritage nor assimilated into dominant cultural norms. Using an intersectional lens, the study reveals how these students navigate competing demands from their heritage and the Western academic environment, emphasizing resilience and agency.

Language and Identity Negotiation

Language acquisition, often viewed as a purely cognitive skill, is closely linked to identity formation in the context of this study. Fatima's experiences

demonstrate that ESL learning is not merely a linguistic endeavor but a process of self-construction and transformation. She mentioned,

Reading is hard right now; I must always open the dictionary to understand. This constant interruption can make it challenging to stay engaged with the text. However, I am committed to improving my comprehension and vocabulary, so I will keep working through these challenges (Fatima, ESL personal experience, 2024).

As these students engage with a new language, they simultaneously navigate the negotiation of their identities. Their struggles with language proficiency reflect broader sociocultural challenges as they attempt to reconcile their lived experiences with the expectations of their new academic environment. This dynamic aligns with the growing body of literature that emphasizes the recognition of language as an embodied, relational practice through which students construct meaning and navigate the complex terrain of identity (Norton, 2000).

The study also highlights how cultural identity is not static but is instead co-constructed through ongoing interactions with others, including peers, faculty, and institutional structures. This process of identity negotiation is influenced not only by the students' personal narratives but also by larger socio-political discourses that shape how they are perceived and treated in educational settings (Gee, 2000). Thus, intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding how the confluence of race, gender, culture, and language continuously reshapes the identities of international students.

Institutional Implications for Fostering Inclusive ESL Environments

The findings of this study have profound implications for how educational institutions design and implement ESL programs. The challenges faced by the participants are not solely related to language proficiency but are deeply intertwined with broader socio-cultural dynamics that influence their experiences. Therefore, institutions must adopt culturally responsive and intersectional strategies to support international students.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A central recommendation is the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy within ESL programs. Instructors must be trained to recognize and validate students' cultural and religious identities within the curriculum. Such an approach would involve designing learning environments that acknowledge and incorporate the cultural backgrounds of students, allowing them to engage meaningfully with academic content. As Gay (2010) argues, culturally responsive teaching not only affirms students' identities but also fosters more effective learning outcomes. For example, incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into classroom discussions and assignments can help bridge the gap between students' prior knowledge and the academic content, thereby enhancing their engagement and academic success.

Cultural Competency and Intersectionality Training for Educators

Furthermore, professional development programs focused on cultural competency and intersectionality are essential. Faculty members must be equipped with the tools to understand the complex interplay of gender, race, culture, and language in the lives of their students. This training should include workshops on how to design inclusive curricula and create classroom environments that are sensitive to the intersectional identities of international students (Banks, 2006). Educators must be made aware of the unique challenges faced by Arab female Muslim international students, particularly those related to gendered and religious expectations, and adjust their teaching practices accordingly.

Flexible Scheduling and Support Services

The study also underscores the need for flexible scheduling and tailored support services. Traditional academic structures often fail to accommodate the diverse needs of international students, exacerbating feelings of isolation and marginalization. By offering extended office hours, alternative assessment methods, and dedicated support centers, institutions can create more inclusive environments that support students' academic, emotional, and cultural well-being. Furthermore, partnerships with community organizations and cultural centers can extend support networks beyond the classroom, providing students with opportunities for peer support, cultural exchange, and social integration (Mori, 2000).

Comparisons with Existing Literature on International Student Adaptation

The findings of this study align with broader literature on international student adaptation, which consistently emphasizes the challenges related to language barriers, cultural dissonance, and discrimination. Studies by Gudykunst and Kim (2017) and Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) have highlighted the significant impact of language proficiency on students' self-concept and academic trajectories. Similarly, the literature on cultural adaptation stresses the importance of supportive institutional environments that mitigate the stress associated with acculturation (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). The reliance on peer networks and faculty mentorship observed in this study mirrors similar findings in other contexts, further reinforcing the universality of these coping strategies.

However, the study's emphasis on intersectionality contributes to the existing literature by highlighting how the multiplicative effects of overlapping social identities create unique challenges for students. This perspective is particularly significant in the context of Arab female Muslim international students, whose experiences are often shaped by the intersecting forces of race, gender, religion, and culture. By analyzing these students' experiences through an intersectional lens, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and opportunities they face in ESL environments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights the role of intersectionality in shaping the experiences of Arab female Muslim international students in ESL classrooms. Their identities are influenced by multiple social factors, impacting academic and social integration. Intersectionality, a framework developed by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical lens to examine how overlapping identities—such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and immigrant status—affect these students' educational experiences. This study highlights how these intersecting factors influence their academic and social integration, emphasizing the necessity of culturally responsive strategies to foster an inclusive learning environment.

1. ***Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.*** Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) plays a crucial role in addressing the challenges faced by Arab female Muslim students in ESL classrooms. Gay (2018) defines CRP as a teaching approach that acknowledges students' cultural backgrounds and incorporates them into the learning process. For Muslim international students, CRP can involve recognizing religious practices, such as prayer times and Ramadan fasting, and using texts that reflect a variety of perspectives. Paris and Alim (2017) further develop this idea with culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasizes not just validating students' identities, but also promoting the preservation of their cultural and linguistic heritage. By embedding CRP into ESL programs, educators can improve student engagement and academic achievement (Haddix, 2021).
2. ***Cultural Competency Training for Educators.*** Faculty members must be equipped with the skills to navigate diverse classrooms. Cultural competency training helps educators recognize and address biases, promoting an inclusive environment. Intercultural competence requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable effective interaction with students from diverse backgrounds (Deardorff, 2020). Studies show that when instructors receive cultural competency training, they better meet the needs of marginalized student populations, including Arab female Muslim international students (Zaal, 2017). Training should focus on recognizing microaggressions, developing inclusive curricula, and fostering safe spaces for dialogue (Sue et al., 2019).
3. ***Flexible Scheduling and Tailored Support Services.*** Institutions must adopt flexible academic structures that accommodate the unique needs of international students. Research by Andrade (2022) highlights that international students often experience academic and social isolation due to cultural and linguistic barriers. For Arab Muslim female students, these challenges may be compounded by gendered expectations and religious practices. Providing flexible scheduling options, such as online courses and alternative examination dates, can alleviate these barriers. Additionally, tailored support services, including mentorship programs, peer support

groups, and culturally sensitive counseling, have been shown to enhance students' sense of belonging and academic performance (Glass et al., 2019).

4. **Expanding Research on Intersectionality in ESL Contexts.** While this study focuses on Arab female Muslim international students, broader research is necessary to explore intersectionality in other international student populations. Intersectionality should be examined across different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds to assess the effectiveness of culturally responsive practices in diverse ESL settings (Shields, 2020). Longitudinal studies tracking international students' academic progress and social integration can provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of inclusive policies (Collins, 2019).

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